

# The Theatre

**N**EAR Philadelphia last week, in the tiny Hedgerow Theatre, I saw two "American Tragedies" where only one was scheduled. One was Erwin Piscator's dramatization of Dreiser's famous novel as staged by Jasper Deeter. The other was Deeter.

Jasper Deeter is a theatre artist whose name, like Piscator's in pre-Nazi Germany, should be honored and whose work should be seen by large sections of the revolutionary working class, with whom he has been in sympathy for years. Instead, in order to keep his theatre alive to present plays he believes in, Deeter is forced to present pap like *Happy Ending* and *Spring in Autumn* before audiences composed for the most part of idle rich "patrons" from the great estates which surround Hedgerow. This is an American tragedy that will not be remedied until Jasper Deeter leaves the isolation of Hedgerow and identifies himself completely with the great revolutionary audience that has never heard of him but is waiting nevertheless to welcome his work.

Piscator has fashioned Dreiser's novel into a powerful propaganda play against capitalism, and Deeter's clear, class-conscious production of *An American Tragedy* makes it one of the most straightforward, uncompromising revolutionary plays ever staged in this country. From the time the Narrator begins by proclaiming that "this tragedy is as natural as the opposition of the classes," Deeter never permits the audience to forget the real forces that move Clyde Griffiths to betray his fellow-workers, his sweetheart Roberta and his own innately decent character as he pursues the American Dream of success to the very shadow of the electric chair.

Clyde Griffiths is always seen in the No Man's Land between the classes, which are always arranged in sharp contrast to each other. While the workers are slaving below, the upper level of the small stage shows the rich Griffiths taking it easy in their offices. While Clyde and Roberta work together or pursue their forbidden love below, the rich Griffiths act out their sheltered, luxurious, empty lives above. The workers are given simple, direct and unaffected bearing in contrast to the stylized, stiff and pretentious mannerisms of the idle rich. Deeter gets

marvelous performances out of the young Hedgerow actors.

Not only two levels are used, for Deeter is a resourceful director who knows how to make full use of the stage. In the Christmas-eve scene, for example, after Clyde breaks his promise to be with Roberta in order to attend a party with his rich acquaintances, he is shown being fitted into a dress suit in an imaginary store in the center of the stage. Meanwhile, unemployed workers on the left sing "Pie in the Sky" while, on the right, the pious sing "Silent Night." As Clyde leaves the "store" to climb to the level on high where the rich are dancing and making merry, the workers stop him and tell him they are starving while he buys evening clothes. He breaks away and joins his wealthy friends while the workers' song of protest against starvation drowns out the holy song and breaks into the world above.

*An American Tragedy* is class war set upon the stage by a first-rate artist who belongs to the theatres of the working class.

HERBERT KLINE.

## Other Theatre Notes

When the New Theatre of Philadelphia, after six months of preparation and a stirring, victorious fight against censorship, finally presented its first play, *Too Late to Die* by Christopher Wood, the audience was prepared to see a fine revolutionary work. Unfortunately, the play suffers from weaknesses common to early workers-theatre plays. It has an unwieldy carry-all plot. The characterization is slight. There is present always the tendency to substitute expository conversation and story telling for dramatic images and action. Wood tells rather than dramatizes the story of Chester Jones, an incredibly naive unemployed machinist who, after a series of harrowing experiences finally learns what it's all about and becomes a radical. As the story is unfolded in twenty scenes (which would have dragged terribly if not for Lem Ward's ingenuity in keeping the production moving smoothly) we

realize that *Too Late to Die* is a good play in the making that suffers from having been born too soon. How it ever got beyond the New Theatre studio, with such a fine revolutionary play as *Waiting for Lefty* available, is a mystery. The acting was unusually good in the mass scenes.

"National Theatre Week" will be celebrated with the presentation of seventeen new revolutionary plays. On Saturday, May 25, the Theatre of Action will give a special opening preview of *The Young Go First*, their new full-length play of C.C.C. camp life, at the Park Theatre. John Howard Lawson will speak after the performance.

On Sunday, May 26, the Group Theatre will present Art Smith's new play *The Tide Rises*, a drama of the West Coast general strike, at the Belasco. In addition, Jimmy Savo, star comic of *Parade*, will preside as Master of Ceremonies and will give several feature numbers. The Dance Players, an experimental group in coordinating drama and dance, will appear in *Protest*.

Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, May 27, 28 and 29: lectures on creative problems of the theatre arts by M. Gorelik, M. Solatorov, Anita Block, Lee Strasberg and Herbert Kline.

The conference will culminate with the competitions of fifteen New Theatre League groups in new plays at the Manhattan Lyceum, 66 East 4th Street, New York on May 31 and June 1. Information may be had at the New Theatre League, 114 West 14th Street, New York.

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# The Screen

## *The Informer*

THOSE horrible years of British Imperialism and Civil War in Ireland (1920-23) serve as background for John Ford's latest film, *The Informer* (R. K. O.). It is based on Liam O'Flaherty's ten-year-old novel of the same title. Within its box-office limitations it is one of the best things to come from Hollywood and is Mr. Ford's most mature film. As a result of these limitations the film is conceived as pure melodrama (as in Fritz Lang's *M*, which seems to have influenced *The Informer* a great deal) at the expense of reality and true tragedy.

The film concentrates its attentions on Gypo Nolan, a degenerate and dull-witted giant, ex-member of a revolutionary group who is in love with a prostitute, Katie. Gypo "informs" on his pal, Frankie McPhillip, a leading member of the rebel group, who is wanted for murder by the Black and Tans (the British troops during the Irish Revolution). Mr. Ford gives Gypo the sentimental motivation of wanting the twenty pounds reward in order to take him and his girl to America. However, with the money in his pocket, Gypo feels pretty cocky and begins to squander it. Most of the film deals with Gypo's wanderings from pub to pub to brothel, with the organization trailing him.

Finally Gypo is tried in the illegal "People's Court" and sentenced to death (the outstanding sequence of the film). He escapes and hides in Katie's room. Katie unwittingly gives him away (the worst part of the film and the closest to the Hollywood tradition) and he is finally shot.

Although O'Flaherty's novel doesn't give a clear-cut picture of the Irish Revolution, since the author's paramount interest is analyzing adventurers, degenerates and psychopaths rather than social forces in the book, one doesn't lose the social scene entirely. And while a film-maker can't include everything in the novel one does expect that the essence, the richness of the background, the social scene which would make the characters alive and dynamic, be integrated as a part of the film. Ford uses Irish history merely as a backdrop and as a result his characters are just so much light and shadow on celluloid.

He has changed the time of the story from the Civil War to the period of the British intervention which is evaded anyway. This change is partly explained by his class bias and by the fact that the film would have been more difficult to produce the other way. It would have necessitated a revolutionary approach. He would have had to show that

Frankie McPhillip was not wanted by the Black and Tans, but by the police of the Republic; that he was accused of killing a union official during one of the many agricultural uprisings; that Katie the prostitute was not the conventional bad woman who innocently betrays her lover, but a former factory worker and also ex-member of the revolutionary organization who was expelled for public prostitution and unreliability; that although she was chock full of dope she didn't hesitate to give up her lover (Gypo) who had turned stoolpigeon; that the people of Dublin were much more concerned with their economic problems; that the farmers were in revolt against the new Republic; that Frankie and his father (a bricklayer and an ex-Socialist) symbolized the political struggles between the Communists and the Reformists. It would have been an honest, stirring and vital film, and a terrific indictment of British Imperialism and of the present corrupt Irish "Free State." And it would have lasted longer than a week at (even) the Music Hall.

None of us is so naive that we expect such a film from Hollywood. But it is important to recognize that *The Informer* is about the closest Hollywood will ever come to producing a film with living human beings in it. After all John Ford is in a privileged class among directors; he is also a producer which gives him a certain amount of immunity from the Hollywood machine. Other directors wouldn't dare, wouldn't get the opportunity to do as good a film, with all its romantics, as *The Informer*. PETER ELLIS.

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